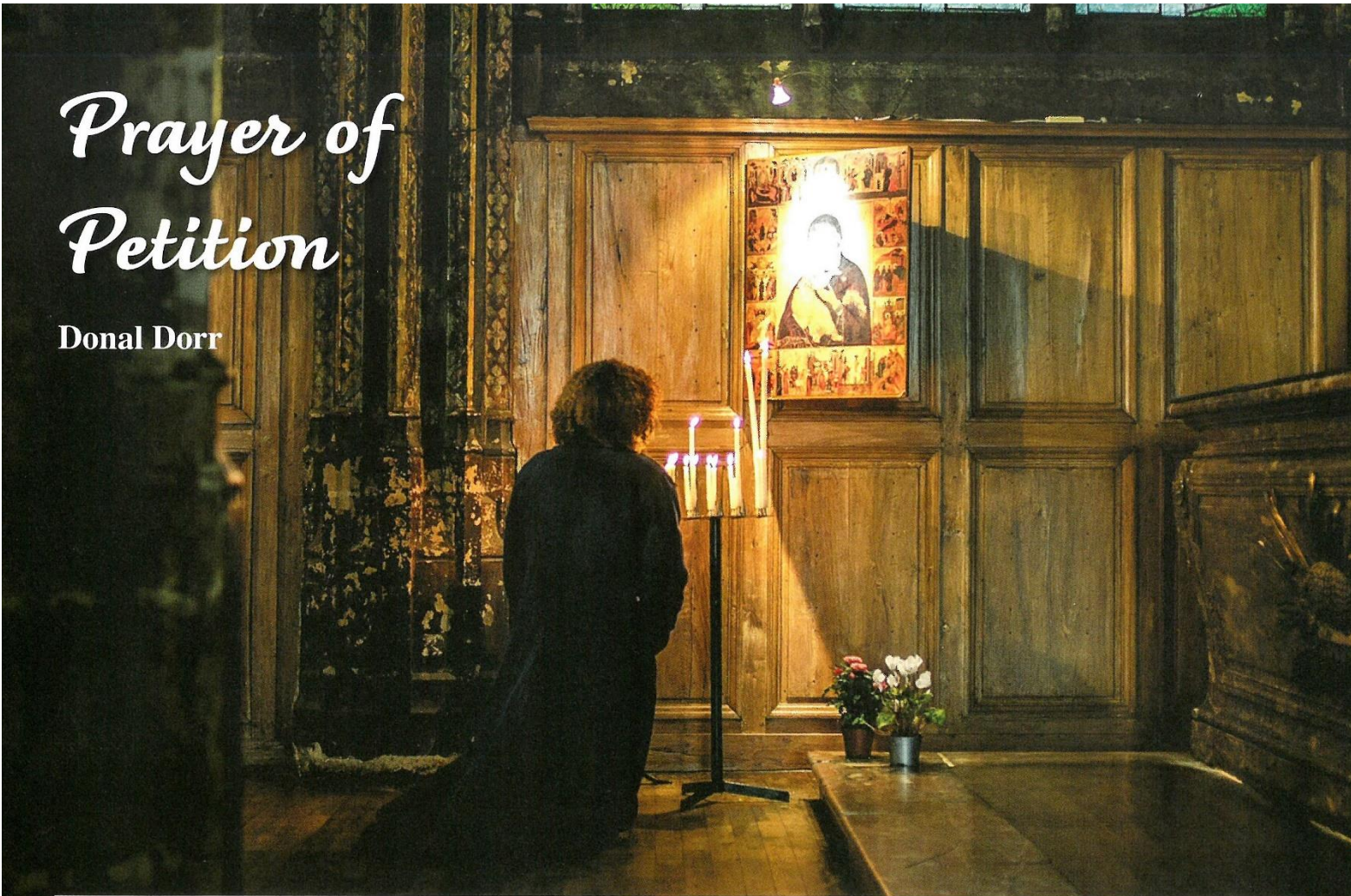


Prayer of Petition

Donal Dorr



Pope Francis maintains that the various expressions of popular devotion so often used by poor people are the work of the Holy Spirit. In his first major document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, he says that these people 'have much to teach us' (EG 126). They offer us 'a mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them' (EG 198). A major element in this popular piety of impoverished people is petition – prayer for healing or success of all kinds. Pope Francis says, 'Let us not downplay prayer of petition.' (EG 154)

JESUS

We take a certain risk when we ask God for something, because we can never be quite sure that what we are asking for is actually what will be best for us. That is why we need guidance from the Holy Spirit to know what we ought to pray for. St Paul tells us that the Spirit prays in us and with us, at times even in sighs too deep for words. (Romans 8:26) The Spirit knows better than we do what we really need and the Spirit can reveal our deepest needs to us.

From Jesus we learn to trust and to allow ourselves to be led by compassion. There are times when Christians feel called to pray earnestly for some particular favour – for healing for a sick friend, for success in exams, for reconciliation with somebody who has hurt us, or for the courage and strength to continue campaigning for ecological justice. In the Gospels, Jesus encourages us to ask and assures us

that our prayer will be answered. (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9) In the parable of the woman who pesters an unjust judge until he grants her request (Luke 18:1–8), Jesus even urges us to make our prayers with insistence and persistence. The overall message of the Gospels is that a crucial dimension of the robust adult faith of the mature Christian is a simple faith that allows one to confidently turn to God in the manner in which a child makes a request of a devoted parent.

There is nothing childish about making our petitions to God; it is childlike but not childish. Of course, we know that God already knows all our needs. But the reason why we make our petitions is not because God needs to hear them but because we need to make them. Making our requests is a way of acknowledging and nourishing the reality of our dependence on our loving God.

It is of course important to pray about big issues. But praying about our minor issues can be equally important. It has the effect of bringing God into even the smallest details of our everyday lives. We are invited to pray with faith. But what kind of faith is this? Certainly not the kind of presumptuous quasi-magical faith that preachers of 'the prosperity gospel' call for. But, on the other hand, it is not the watered-down conception of faith of those who put so much emphasis on accepting the will of God that they effectively undermine any prayer of petition that we make. Somewhere in between these distorted

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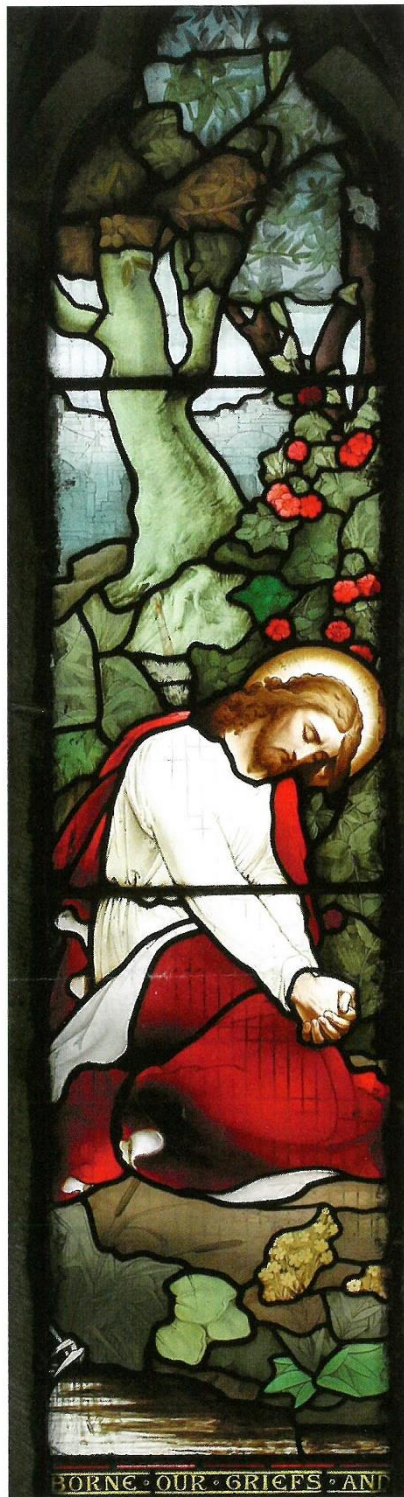
versions of faith there are two truly Christian kinds of prayer of petition: the prayer of desperation and the prayer of freedom. I shall look at each of these in turn.

FROM DESPERATION TO PRAYER IN FREEDOM

In the Psalms we find some quite shocking prayers: ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ (Psalm 22); ‘Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has anger taken the place of God’s compassion?... What hurts me most is this – that God is no longer powerful’ (Psalm 77). There are times when we need to make such cries of desperation, of outrage that God, whom we believe to be just and compassionate, should allow us to be treated in a way that leaves us in a dehumanised state. We are scandalised by the way we have been treated – and by God who has allowed this mistreatment to happen.

When my faith is put to the test in this way, I must strip away all the layers of self-deception behind which I have been hiding. I know deep down that the only way to pray authentically is to stand naked before God, expressing openly the deepest feelings and thoughts of my heart at this moment.

It takes great courage to challenge God so bluntly. If I dare to pray to God in this manner, then behind my outrage I must believe that my God is a God of compassion who stands for justice and protection of those in trouble. Even though I may feel that God has abandoned me, some deep instinct tells me that the



Agony in the Garden, stained glass window from Dunfermline Abbey church in Fife, Scotland.

(Photo: L. Lew, OP)

first step in escaping from this situation is to cry out before God, even against the God who has allowed this to happen. The most important effect of praying the prayer of desperation is that it is used by God to move us into a greater degree of freedom of spirit. This may come about when, by God’s providence, there is a change in the situation so that it is no longer a source of desperation. At other times God responds to our prayer by strengthening us to face the trial.

The test of whether I am actually praying in freedom of spirit is whether I accept that the response of God to my petition may be ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or ‘not yet’. If I am not willing to accept the answers ‘no’ or ‘not yet’, it means that I am trying to manipulate or force God to do what I want. I need to make my prayer in true freedom, making my request while trusting that God knows what is best for me.

THE LAWS OF SCIENCE

But are we to believe that God intervenes in situations in a way that disrupts the laws of nature? The key to answering this question is the realisation that the universe is not like a clockwork machine. Modern science shows that the laws of nature still allow for the occurrence of random or chance events. This means that there is room for prayers of petition. When we pray that the person be healed we are not praying that God will make an exception to the laws of nature; we are praying for what might be seen as a chance coincidence in which an unlikely conjunction of elements brings about the healing. And if the person does recover we can interpret this unlikely event as an example of God’s particular care for this person and as an answer to our prayer.

However, it is important for us to remember that the plan of God and the action of God remain mysterious, part of the mystery in which we live out our lives. So we must refrain from claiming that any healing or other event is a proof that God exists and has answered this particular prayer of ours. ■

Fr Donal Dorr is a theologian, a writer and a priest of St Patrick’s Missionary Society and lives in Dublin, Ireland. In this article Donal has drawn on material from his new book *A Creed for Today* published by Veritas in Ireland and Orbis Books in the USA.